

Ethical elements in P.B.Shelley's 'Prometheus Unbound'

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Abstract:

Percy Bysshe Shelley is one of the greatest British poets of romanticism. his literary work is great in quantity and quality, where we clearly see the most important features of romanticism, like the overflow of emotions, imagination, importance given to individualism, praise and importance of nature etc. his poetry is various in form and themes. they can be classified in lyrical poems, long narrative poems, plays, etc. in this paper there will be a short presentation on the author and his work in general, but the most important part is the insight of the ethical elements in his greatest narrative poem 'Prometheus unbound'. the variety of themes, ethical messages, Shelley's ideology on revolution and his political views are issues analyzed. For example, the major theme of *Prometheus unbound* is that if humanity chooses to shake off corruption and embrace love (represented by Prometheus's revocation of his curse against Jupiter), then reform – political, social, and religious – will necessarily follow. the poem thus teaches that humans possess the capacity within themselves to effect reform, beginning with the individual rejection of evil. We also tried to make a comparison between Shelley's poem, and the ancient myth about Prometheus, etc. the aesthetical elements included in the poem are also discusses. However, not only 'Prometheus unbound', but majority of Shelley's poems are unique as his life was.

Keywords: *P.B. Shelley, Romanticism, Prometheus Unbound, Ethical Elements*

Romanticism is one of the most intriguing, the most productive and the most interesting literary movement. It is a movement which involves a lot of emotions and feelings, it includes a great interest in individualism, but it is also a revolt against the social, economical and political reality mass of people faced with in the 19th century. One of the most noticeable poets of this time is P.B. Shelley, whose literary work reflects romanticism in its best. He belongs to the second group of romantic poets, together with Keats

and Byron. Shelley died very young, leaving behind a great and valuable literary works, which secured him a position in the world of great and unique poets.

No matter how young he was when he died, Shelley experienced many things during his short life, and although he matured his youth ideas, he still worried about the same issues and he was not less worried about the human fate in general.

These emotions overflowed and resulted in his masterpiece *Prometheus Unbound*, where he clearly stressed his life ideals. The poem was finished in 1819, when Shelley was 27. In fact, the poem was based on an old poem *Prometheus Bound*, attributed to Aeschylus, a great classic writer of Greek literature, where Prometheus makes up with his suppressor, Jupiter, as long as Shelley's poem celebrates Prometheus' victory over the suppressor of the human race. We can clearly see that the struggle between the two forces is taken from Aeschylus' poem, but later Shelley developed what was fully Shelleyan, which appeared to be a lyrical drama full of variety of characters, scenes and songs, and it represents a crack between the old Greek myth and Shelley's work. Aeschylus' character is far from simply being a suffering philanthropist and a rebel, which is the case with Shelley's character which is surely a reflection of the poet himself. '*Prometheus Unbound*' is an 'embodiment of dramatic action that it represents; it is not a container for that action but a means through which the action is expressed' (Croning, 1981, p. 134), and with the major character, the author represents human mind and reason while celebrating victory of reason and freedom over evil.

Prometheus Unbound is a four act lyrical drama, with a complex and specific structure, since the fourth, the last act is fully lyrical. The first act is made of a single scene, and it represents a continuous series of actions concentrated on one character, in this case, on Prometheus, who cannot move because of the shackles. He is suffering but is comforted somehow by the two Oceanides, Iona and Panthea, whereas Asia, his beloved is far away. This separation in fact represents as a separation between the cognitive and the imaginative or creative part of the soul. In this state of his, Prometheus speaks his monologue addressing to Jupiter, the world's oppressor. This in fact stresses the difference and opposition between them, but also their opposition with God. Prometheus struggles against his hatred towards Jupiter, but also he cannot forget his old desire to revenge. The monologue ends with his request to remember the curse he once threw on Jupiter. The repetition of the curse is the closing of the first theme of the poem, and also the end of the first part.

In the second part Prometheus deals with his struggle and survives the challenge. He is seen by Iona and Panthea, the daughters of Ocean, who now act as a Greek choir. Meanwhile, Mercury appears, who is Jupiter's messenger and threatens Prometheus that if he doesn't reveal his secret, he has to surrender to the jinns Mercury has brought. This choir in fact challenges with visions of human suffering like wars, industrial urbanization, failure of the French Revolution, Christ's crucifixion etc, that remind us of *Those who do endure/ Deep wrongs for man, and corn, and chains, but heap – Thousands folds torment on themselves and him* –I.594-596 (P.B.Shelley, 2004) . These jinns are mental and exist only in the '*dim caves of human mind* –I,658-63 (P.B.Shelley, 2004)- '

Prometheus is here presented as a human conscience in its noble level, which at the beginning doesn't understand what love is. As soon as Goodness becomes aware of what Love is, wonderful things will happen. This is the main idea of the first act.

The second act is consisted of more scenes and it represents a quest, done by Asia, which is in contrast with the passive first act. Many beautiful images of nature appear here, which represent the life itself. It is interesting that Prometheus does not appear in this act, but it is an act where Oceanides dominate. The two sisters, Panthea and Asia discuss about their dreams, which foretell Prometheus' release, but they also have an erotic meaning. After their debate, they climb the Rocks of Demogorgon, and see a wonderful view. After Asia and Panthea are overwhelmed by their surroundings and witness the acts of nature around the mountains, a Song of Spirits begins, calling them "*To the deep, to the deep,/ Down, down!*" II.iii. 54-55. (P.B.Shelley, 2004) After this, they descend, and they find themselves in front of a cave, which is Demogorgon's shelter. This is how scene IV begins. Here Panthea describes Demogorgon upon his ebony throne: "*I see a mighty darkness/ Filling the seat of power, and rays of gloom/ Dart round, as light from the meridian sun,/ Ungazed upon and shapeless; neither limb,/ Nor form, nor outline; yet we feel it is/ A living Spirit.*". II.iv.101-106 (P.B.Shelley, 2004). Asia asks Demogorgon many questions, beginning with a question about the creator of the world, and Demogorgon declares that God created all, both the good and the bad; then he gives accounts of the history of Saturn and Jupiter as rulers of the universe. After this, Asia declares that "*Then Prometheus/ Gave wisdom, which is strength, to Jupiter,/ And with this law alone, 'Let man be free,'/ Clothed him with the dominion of wide Heaven. To know nor faith, nor love, nor law; to be/ Omnipotent but friendless is to reign*". II.iv, 43-48. (P.B.Shelley, 2004) She considers Jupiter responsible for all of the

problems of the world: famine, disease, strife and death, and on the other hand praises Prometheus, because he gave man fire, the knowledge of mining, speech, science, and medicine. On this, Demogorgon claims that "*All things are subject to eternal Love*" II.iv.120 (P.B.Shelley, 2004)

After this, Asia asks when Prometheus will be freed, to what Demogorgon cries out "*Behold!a.2,sc.iv,128*" and Asia watches as the mountain opens and chariots moves out across the night sky, which Demogorgon explains as being driven by the Hours. One of the Hours stays to talk to Asia, and Asia asks him who he is, to what The Hour responds, "*I am the shadow of a destiny/ More dread than is my aspect: ere yon planet/ Has set, the darkness which ascends with me/ Shall wrap in lasting night heaven's kingless throne.*"II.iv.146-149 (P.B.Shelley, 2004). Panthea witnesses another Hour come, and that Hour asks Asia and Panthea to ride with him. The chariot takes off, and Scene V takes place upon a mountaintop as the chariot stops._The Hour claims that his horses are tired, but Asia encourages him onwards. However, Panthea asks the hour to stay and "*tell whence is the light/ Which fills the cloud? the sun is yet unrisen*" II.v, 8, and the Hour tells her "*Apollo/ Is held in heaven by wonder; and the light... Flows from thy mighty sister.*" II.v, 10-14 (P.B.Shelley, 2004)

Panthea realizes that Asia is changed, and describes how her sister radiates with beauty. A song fills the air singing the "*Life of Life*"II.v.49, a song about the power of love. Asia tells of her current state and describes, "*Realms where the air we breathe is love,/ Which in the winds on the waves doth move,/ Harmonizing this earth with what we feel above.*" II.v 95-97 (P.B.Shelley, 2004) It is through her love that she witnesses how people move through time, and ends with the idea of a coming paradise.

The third act opens in Paradise, where Jupiter reigns. He is presented through a monologue, just like Prometheus in the first act and Asia in the second. He claims to have conquered all but the soul of mankind,"*which might make/ Our antique empire insecure, though built/ On eldest faith, and hell's coeval, fear*" III.i, and admits that "*Even now have I begotten a strange wonder,/ That fatal child, the terror of the earth,/ Who waits but till the distant hour arrive,/ Bearing from Demogorgon's vacant throne/ The dreadful might of ever-living limbs/ Which clothed that awful spirit unbeheld,/ To redescend, and trample out the spark.*" III.i. 18-24. (P.B.Shelley, 2004)

When Jupiter asks who Demogorgon is, he answers: *Eternity. Demand no direr name* III.i. 53 (P.B.Shelley, 2004), and in fact he is eternity, defined as a summary of the whole time. This scene is also an ironic and a wild parody of Paradise Lost, where the Son suppresses the satanic rebellion of

the Father. Demogorgon himself and Messiah board the coach but instead destroying the rebels, Demogorgon destroys Jupiter. In the third act, the focus moves from the mythological character that is present in the first two acts, to humanity. People are now at the center of interest, and as a result the supernatural characters disappear, like Prometheus, Asia, and Jupiter. And this is how the third act ends.

The fourth act is a pure lyric, a long poem of celebration of the new life. It represents a supplement, or a chant, which doesn't have a dramatic character, and where the events of previous acts are celebrated by a chorus of unidentified spirits.

-As far as the characters of Prometheus Unbound are concerned, they are unreal, inhuman, and we also have some abstract and symbolic ones, which belong to no real world, but are personified or incarnated by Shelley, so we may say that they are *'ideas presented in visible shape, principles made more attractive through the lineaments which Shelley gives to them, forces of the human soul translated to a special setting which makes them more vivid and more convincing.'* (Bowra, 1973, p. 107). Prometheus himself is a personification, and is described in the introduction as *"the type of the highest perfection of moral and intellectual nature impelled by the purest and the truest motives to the best and noblest end."*¹

In the first act, he appears as a representative of humans; he resists the challenge and gets free of hatred, envy and revenge. But before he does that, he has to show love, which he does in the second act, through Asia, who is driven to act by the power of his love. His companions are the Oceanides, Panthea, Iona and Asia, who in fact represent Faith, Hope and Love. Prometheus is in fact an imagination that challenges reason, and in comparison to Aeschylus's Prometheus, Shelley's is *'unable to bring mankind back to primitive innocence, used knowledge as a weapon to defeat evil'*².

Jupiter is firstly a representation of a Tyrant, a desire and lust to rule over other people, someone who uses fear and superstition and produces wilderness and ignorance. However, he represents something more as well – he is a personification of what Shelley considers evil, of the destructive forces which can appear in different shapes, and that are fed with the rejection of the good.

¹ Preface of Prometheus Unbound

² Mary Shelley's Notes on Prometheus Unbound-

[//sites.google.com/site/theunbindingprometheusproject/home/pedagogy/mary-shelley-s-note](https://sites.google.com/site/theunbindingprometheusproject/home/pedagogy/mary-shelley-s-note)

Another important character is Demogorgon, a character created by Shelley, an original one. He is personification of chaos and disorder. He is also a metaphor for Jupiter, a son who has defeated his father. The terrible name of Demogorgon had previously appeared in the works of Lucan, Boccaccio, Spenser and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, and Shelley took the name. The name of Demogorgon suggested a kind of opponency to Milton's God for Shelley, something superior, just as we saw above *Eternity. Demand no direr name.*

He is a powerful character, never well visible for other characters, not even for Jupiter, for whom he is *'an imminent will, quiescent until activated by advances in the mind of the man. He stands ready to act as a catalyst in precipitating the great change when, and only when, Man has accepted the ideals of universal love and forgiveness.* (King-Helle & Shelley, 1960, p. 179). Asia is a new image of female figure. She touches Prometheus' emotions since it represents a personification of beauty, love, activity and goodness. She appears in the second act.

Furies appear as a mean of expressing pain, suffering and the difficult state of humanity. And they do it through their visions that they present to Prometheus, they can also represent a part of Jupiter, the image of evil.

The spirits are also important to understand the poem, since each of them represents a certain human virtue, and together they foresee the liberation of Prometheus, implying that he will develop these virtues.

There are also other characters like Spirits of Hours, representing symbol of time, and who finish the story.

Themes – The variety of interwoven themes also add to the complexity of Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound*. They range from the most general ones that deal with humanity in general, to the most personal ones, those of love. The major theme of the poem, according to King-Helle, is Love, and thus, with his love towards Asia, Prometheus tells us that he is ready to get free. His emotions and love also stress his positive virtues, which helped him overcome all the tortures and suffering, and is thus intertwined with the theme of punishment. On the other hand, we can say that the major theme is the myth of universal resurrection, that of regeneration, of a new cycle of humanity. Bowra sees the progress of the soul while in love as a major theme, which is expressed through a lot of imagination.

As far as symbolism is concerned, *Prometheus unbound* is rich in symbols and symbolism. Prometheus himself represents reason, human consciousness, Iona represents the hope, Panthea is the faith, the water is a symbol for existence, streams and rivers are the paths and directions of that existence and the boats floating on the water are the spirits sailing. The

calm water symbolizes the calm state of things, as long as the turbulent water represents the disturbed spirit. Whirlpools stand for risk and danger, whereas the caves symbolize danger and refer to minds that are capable of accepting impressions from the outer world; towers represent introspective minds, used in artistic or scientific, or philosophical thoughts. The Veil usually refers to the curtain between life and death, between the temporal and the ideal. Different interpretations are often used. For Shelley as a revolutionary poet, a perfect symbol is the trumpet or the shell. There is also a Neo-Platonist symbolism: the individual life is seen as a flow of a river, when Asia's soul sails on the waves of the song towards the sea.

Another important aspect of the poem is science. It is clearly noticed in the description of the night, the sky and the stars, where Shelley gives a scientific opinion when he talks about the molecules of water drops which get active in the sunlight and 'dance' when the cloud evaporates. Panthea dreams as if she was a dew drop which evaporates due to the heat caused by the rays of Prometheus, and thus absorbs in him. This shows Shelley's interest in meteorology, and astrology as well. However, this wonderful image is the first among much important sublimation of sexual desires in a scientific way, as is the metaphor of fog scattering which has indirect sexual references: *The bubbles, which the enchantment of the sun*

Sucks from the pale faint water-flowers that pave

The oozy bottom of clear lakes and pools,

Are the pavilions where such dwell and float

Under the green and golden atmosphere...

And when these burst, and the thin fiery air,

The which they breathed within those lucent domes,

Ascends to flow like meteors through the night,

They ride on them, and rein their headlong speed, 80

And bow their burning crests, and glide in fire

Under the waters of the earth again. II.ii.-71-74, 77-82 (P.B.Shelley, 2004)

This scientific element continues when Asia and Panthea stop their conversation to follow the echoes. According to King-Helle, in the fourth act there is a mixture of the exact science with a vivid human metaphor, in the sense that Shelley sees the Earth as '*a living organism subject to pain and disease which he passes on to Man, the unresented parasite on her surface*' (King-Helle & Shelley, 1960, p. 172). Shelley also makes the various parts of this picture scientifically stable. The fourth act arouses a scientific comment as well, no matter that science is not the theme, when

the celebration of Moons love towards Earth is not only declaration of love, but also a careful account of Earth's gravitational pull on the moon.

I, thy crystal paramour,

Borne beside thee by a power

Like the polar Paradise, (P.B.Shelley, 2004)

Magnet-like, of lovers' eyes;

I, a most enamoured maiden,

Whose weak brain is overladen

With the pleasure of her love,

Maniac-like around thee move,

Gazing, an insatiate bride- IV, 463-470 (P.B.Shelley, 2004)

Here love and gravity function as a metaphor for each other. This technique is more powerful when Panthea describes the earth's sphere. Even though this idea was previously used by Dante, Camoes and Milton, Shelley developed it more thoroughly, in details.

Philosophy- Beside the scientific elements, Shelley believed that he was writing a great philosophical poem, where he exposed his most speculative and brave ideas. Poem's philosophy is based on many sources, and the first is Christianity. The Christian motive of crucifixion in the first act is a great example of the philosophy. Shelley permanently praises the resistance, the forgiveness of mistakes and people's good will towards others, while the comparison of Prometheus to Christ in the first act confirms Shelley's Christian morality. However, in Prometheus Unbound, one of the most Christian poems of Shelley, he maintains his disbelief in the church and the institution, not giving any hint that he is going to accept the detailed Christian dogma.

It is known that Shelley's great guru, as far as his literary career and the development of his ideology is concerned, is William Godwin. He was Shelley's spiritual leader, and had undeniable and great influence on him, thus Godwinian spirit is present in many of Shelley's works. He follows Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft in support of sexual equality, in the theme of universal kindness, where the Godwinian and Christian moralities support each other. Above all, Godwin successfully stressed Shelley's hope that human evils and failures will disappear, and this was a motivation to write Prometheus Unbound. As King Helle says, here Shelley tries to get deep into the essence of goodness.

Beside Godwinian ideology, Shelley borrows some ideas from Plato. Platonism offered to Shelley a wide range of concepts which he learned for his own purposes. He gives to aestheticism the form of the ideal form, which Plato discussed in his theory of knowledge, and also plays with

Plato's theory of evil. The Platonist sees the evil as a superficial mark, which cannot be extended to the eternal forms, and in order to bring Plato at the same level with Godwin, Shelley transfers this notion in the real world, so thus Shelley's interest moves from Godwin to Plato. Shelley's interest in Platonism sheds light on his views on religion. We know that the Christian doctrine of immortality of spirit began with Plato, so we can say that Shelley accepted the Christian concept on spirit. No matter he preached the Christian morality, Shelley clashed with his Christian contemporaries and was named as atheist. Secondly, Plato's idea of Spirit-World is also present in Shelley, where nature is equally alive as humans. Shelley believes that everything is alive, including the earth, which is guided by the immanent principles of life.

This is seen as major interpretation of Shelley's aim; however, there is also the political interpretation of the poem. Shelley tries to tell us that political systems change when Jupiter falls. According to this interpretation, Jupiter's fall means the triumph of reforms, and Prometheus represents the Shelley's contemporary scholars. Mercury is a laying stevedore paid by the government, in this case Jupiter, and Furies are toadies.

So, we can say that this poem is a complex one, it has a lot of movement, and each act uses its own dramatic technique. A very important element that gives value to the poem is the variety of meter, where blank verse dominates, and which is present in massive monologues and dialogues. This kind of verses is used to mark the transition parts, or suppressed emotions, whereas in every climax of passion, the poem is its lyric form, where Shelley's extraordinary ability of poetic orchestration is visible. The basic blank verse covers more than half of the poem, but it changes in tone in order it tells the difference between characters, thus, in the opening monologues of the first, second and third act Prometheus is the steepest and rude, Asia is gentle and delicate and Jupiter is authoritative, dominant. The power of discussion lies in the description of evils of the ancient world, and when the Miltonic blank verse is repeated in the discussion about the past's destructiveness of fiction, and in the act when Asia confronts the past of the world, its history, we see that Prometheus' dimensions and monumentality are expressed also in time and space component. The space component of the poem covers the Pacific and Atlantic coast of Caucasus in central Asia, India's Far East, but also the endless space of the universe. This stresses the hyperbolic and fantastic dimension that Shelley uses and that makes the poem typically romantic. Beside the blank verse, there are 36 other verse forms in the poem.

Another stylistic characteristic that Shelley uses is the excessive use of compound adjectives. There are 147 compound adjectives in *Prometheus Unbound* in all four acts of the poem. They range from those conventional ones like- *outré*, to *all- conquering* and *panic –stricken*, to *inter transpicuous* and *tempest-wrinkled*, which make the airy and light verses become more powerful.

Biasness, Shelley's preference of *Wingless* to *winged*, is due to his recognition of Homer's winged words, as far as images of *serpent– eagle* are taken from the *Iliad*. Not only is the morphological aspect of Shelley's poem specific, the syntax is specific as well, which in some cases is tensed and unnatural due to the fact that Shelley wants to insert simple sentences or phrases between the subject and the verb. According to King-Helle, Shelley borrowed the syntax and diction from the 1st and the 2nd book of Milton's *Paradise Lost*.

All this makes us conclude that the stressed quality of the poem is because of the achieved unity of form and content, so that the action in the poem should be unified with its activity and nature. In general, this is the longest and the best poem of the 19th century, which is near to perfection.

Magnificent characters, interesting issues, specific form, all this makes *Prometheus Unbound* a trademark of British Literature of the 19th century and more.

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